

Kingdom, Come!
By Jason Huff
Psalm 145:9-21, 1 Corinthians 15:12-26, Luke 17: 20-37

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 17: 20-37. Listen now to God's Word. "Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." Then he said to his disciples, "The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left." "Where, Lord?" they asked. He replied, "Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather.""

2012. The Road. Legion. Terminator: Salvation. Knowing. The Book of Eli. Heard of any of these? They're all the latest crop of movies in the last year about the apocalypse! Looking at a list like this, it would be easy to say that we are obsessed with the end of the world, but it's not anything new. It comes in waves, it seems, and any time there's a recession or a global conflict, we think about the end of the world all the more. People have been trying to predict the end of the world for millennia, and stories about some future judgment at the end of time exist in many cultures around the world. By virtually every account, the world should have ended by now, but somehow, the earth just keeps on spinnin'.

Jesus brings up the end of the world. He wants to talk about it...but He wants us to think about it differently than the world does. In this passage, Jesus teaches us four things about the end times. They help us understand the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the return of Jesus, the Kingdom's crown prince. If we get these points, we can have peace about the future.

First, *Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God cannot be found by careful observation because it's already coming among us.* Like everybody else, the Pharisees wanted to know when the Kingdom of God was coming. They were convinced that when the Messiah arrived, He would destroy the Romans, free them from their oppression, and turn Israel once and for all into the nation above all nations. It's the reason they rejected Jesus as the Messiah – he didn't fit their expectations. They expected to see an earthly kingdom led by a great warrior, and the sooner the better. That's how they measured the arrival of the Kingdom of God.

What they didn't realize was that the Kingdom had already come and they didn't even realize it. When Jesus arrived on the scene, the Kingdom had arrived. Jesus had brought it with him straight into the heart of enemy territory, straight into the midst of sin and evil and death. He was proof that God's Kingdom was emerging right in their midst. The Pharisees were looking in all the wrong places because they weren't looking at Jesus.

Now the way the verse reads in the New International Version we read this morning, it says, "The Kingdom is within you." This isn't supposed to be some spiritual understanding of the Kingdom of God. Jesus never said that we can find the Kingdom of God inside ourselves in some sort of spiritual fashion. We have to be really careful with this translation because lots of new-age religions say that God is within you personally. That's not what this means in the Greek. It means that the Kingdom is coming from within your group, from amongst you, right within your very grasp. It's coming from the outside, but it's right there in the midst of everyone. The only way the Kingdom of God resides within us is when we accept Christ's salvation into our hearts and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside of us as believers. It's external to us. God Himself brings His Kingdom to us.

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask for the Kingdom of God to come. It has come and continues to come in our midst. It's just like we said a moment ago about enemy territory. In Jesus Christ, God has come to free us from our sin and everything that separates us from Him. He's conquering hearts and minds as He goes, releasing captives and setting prisoners free. Jesus' arrival on earth signaled D-Day, and in Jesus' death and resurrection we know eternal victory is assured. The Kingdom has arrived in power. And yet there are many miles to go before victory is complete and the Kingdom is here in all its fullness. All around us the battle is raging. It just depends on whether or not you have the spiritual insight to see it. 2 Timothy 2:3-4 says that we who are Christians are soldiers for Christ Jesus, enduring hardship for Him, no longer concerned about civilian affairs but instead desiring to please Him who is our commanding officer. We are part of the Kingdom, and through our words and actions, we show that God has victory in our lives and wants for all people to know Him as the hero who has conquered all for our salvation.

Second, *Jesus taught not to worry about missing His return.* He knew that the lives of His followers would be difficult, enough so that when things got desperate, we'd long for Him to return and to bring the Kingdom of God with Him in its fullness. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians and 2 Timothy, Paul talks about how false teachers claimed Jesus had already come back, and how these lies were destroying the faith of some believers. Not even a full thirty years after His death and resurrection, the church was expecting His return! But Jesus says that it's not something we will miss. It will happen in the blink of an eye, and when it does, everyone on earth will know.

Even though Israel wasn't a very large place in comparison to the whole of the Roman Empire, this teaching brought questions. How could Jesus appear to everyone around the world at once? Though nothing is outside of God's ability, it also seems that technology has made it so that within a few more decades or centuries, everyone might be able to know in a moment's time about an event somewhere across the globe. Who knows how God will do it? We can't wrap our heads around it. But we don't have to, because Jesus told us that we wouldn't miss it, no matter how or when it comes about.

We don't have to look very far to find that Christians in the centuries past and even within our own culture are worried about missing Jesus' return. We've all heard the stories of people claiming to be the messiah, from David Koresh to Jim Jones, and seen the damage done. They aren't the only ones...folks ranging from the Jehovah's Witnesses to Jerry Falwell have unsuccessfully predicted the return of Christ. And even if we aren't easily swayed by false prophets like these, Bible studies on the end times and fiction series on the subject like *Left Behind* are perennial bestsellers.

Now we *should* be interested in the Bible and what God has to say about what's coming. We should always be studying to understand everything God has given us so that we might be in a closer relationship with Him. Problem is, when we become obsessed with dates and times and places and possibilities, we live worried about the future rather than focused on what God would have us do here and now. As Jesus said earlier in Luke, "Don't worry about what you will eat or drink. God knows the things that you need. Seek His Kingdom, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:34 continues the thought when Jesus says, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." There's no need to worry about the second coming because it's not what the Christian life is about. The Christian life is about seeking God's Kingdom...when that Kingdom comes in all its fullness, we will not miss out.

There's another reason we shouldn't get worried about figured out the signs of Jesus' return or missing it. *Jesus taught that His return will happen as everyone is living life just as they always have.* He uses two examples of catastrophic events from Genesis – the flood of the earth and the destruction of Sodom, a notoriously wicked city. In each case, people were just going about their daily lives – buying, selling, eating, drinking, marrying, building, planting. Sounds a lot like our day. Suddenly, in the midst of it all, utter destruction.

Later in Luke, we'll see where Jesus does give some signs that the Kingdom is coming in its fullness. But even in the midst of those signs, Jesus says, "Don't be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away." The truth is, despite all the signs, life will go on. And that's true today. In the last century, we've seen the largest wars the world has ever seen. We've had tragic events like 9/11, typhoons, hurricanes, earthquakes, man-made and natural. Those events shake us for a time, but then the world goes on just like it always has. For those directly affected by those circumstances, it's as real as it gets. But most of us give money for aid, say a prayer, and move on. Even if we see potential signs of the Kingdom coming into our midst, our regular lives go unaffected. We can argue if a particular event is a sign from God, but it doesn't matter if it doesn't change how we live or the way we see God working around us.

And this gets to the one thing that really affects us today: *Jesus teaches us to be prepared today for the Kingdom.* Jesus uses common habits in his illustration to make His point. In ancient Israel, homes were built close to the ground with flat roofs, and it was often where families would go to rest or relax. They spent a lot of time up there avoiding the heat and socializing. Jesus says, when He returns, everyone should be ready for Him – nobody running down the ladder to grab stuff. The person out working the field shouldn't be concerned about their possessions but instead waiting to greet the Messiah as He comes. Because when judgment comes, it will be like the blink of an eye – in the midst of everyday activities like milling grain or sleeping, suddenly, one is judged and the other saved.

As Jesus has told the disciples before, it's a matter of being ready for His return no matter when it comes...not just sitting around and waiting for Him to show up, but having a heart and life that's ready for His arrival. When Jesus says that His followers shouldn't be heading back for anything, He means that we should be getting rid of anything in our lives that keeps us from Him. None of the stuff of this world is going with us. When Lot and his family were saved from the destruction of Sodom, they were warned not to look back. Lot's wife did it anyway, and we are told she turned into a pillar of salt. When we have committed our lives to God, there's no going back.

It seems really harsh to us, but God's love for us is incredible, and so is His jealousy for us. He made us to be in relationship with Him, and while we like the distractions of this world, He desires us to be His and His alone. In the book of the prophet Hosea, God describes His people as an unfaithful wife who He would pursue and woo despite all her sin and shame. His desire is for us to be faithful and pure again. He loves us enough to forgive everything that's happened in our past, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ He made that possible. He wants us to become the people He created us to be. But at the end of it all, whether it's when Christ returns or when we die, if we are still unwilling to drop all those things that entangle us and be His loving bride, then He will let us have our way. He will not force us into an eternity with Him we do not want. So now is the time to prepare for our final day. We don't know when that day is going to be. That means that now is the day to get untangled. Now is the day to be faithful. Now is the day to clear out the clutter. Now is the day to get rid of everything that keeps you from God.

When the disciples once again prove they are clueless and ask where this will happen, Jesus tells a proverb – “where there's a dead body, you'll find the vultures.” Not a pleasant image! But in His frustration with the disciples, Jesus tells us a simple truth...wherever the Kingdom comes on the scene, you'll know it. When it arrives, people start turning from sin and find salvation in Jesus. Other people belittle it and attack it. When the Kingdom arrives, some find transformation and redemption while others call it a myth and a hoax. But you'll know where it's come...just follow the evidence. And when the Kingdom of God comes in all its majesty, when our faith is proven true, there won't be any question...the proof will be in plain sight.

It's not easy to think about judgment and the end of the world. It seems scary and strange and hard to understand. But Jesus taught that if we are prepared in our hearts for His arrival, if we have given our lives over to Him, no matter when we should meet Him, it will be a time of joy. For we will find our lives that we had lost have been returned to us, cleansed, made whole, and perfected through God's immeasurable love for us. With our brothers and sisters in Christ through history, we say, “Come Lord Jesus,” living as if He is already in our midst, patiently preparing for the day when He comes in glory.